

Contact lens wear discouraged on deployments

SPANGDAHLEM AIR BASE, Germany — Blowing sand, smoke and fine dust particles are an eyeball's worst nightmare. Now imagine holding up your unit because you have "something in your eye."

This type of scenario is exactly what optometrists fear most when Airmen wear contact lenses while working in a deployed environment. People who require medical equipment, like corrective eyewear, must deploy with all required items in their possession, including two pairs of eyeglasses, if needed, and protective mask eyeglass inserts, according to U.S. Central Command guidance issued in January.

This guidance resulted from lessons learned from recent conflicts and joint missions, officials said.

"If the Army, Navy and Marines can't deploy with contact lenses and must wear their glasses, then the Air Force should follow suit when deploying," said Maj. **Robert Kescad**, 52nd Aerospace Medicine

Squadron optometry flight commander. "As of right now, if Airmen want to wear their contacts while they're [deployed], they have to get preapproval from their [deployed] commander."

Contact lenses are time consuming to take care of, and they have become an operational safety issue as well, officials said.

"It was discovered that 90 percent of ocular foreign bodies were preventable just by wearing glasses," said Capt. **Jeff Autrey**, 52nd AMDS optometry clinical services chief. "Many man-hours were lost [because of] troops with nonbattle injuries [from] problems with contact lenses and having 'something in your eye.'"

People deploying must contend with field conditions that may not allow for proper contact lens hygiene, which could lead to an increase in eye abrasions, infections and ulcers.

"The 'unclean' environment and

extended hours of continuous operations lead to people over-wearing the contacts," Captain Autrey said. "Continuous wearing of lenses without removal may cause inflammation, infection and permanent loss of vision."

Such side effects include sensitivity to light, tearing, burning and scratching. To reduce these symptoms, Airmen who normally wear contact lenses can wear their civilian or everyday prescription glasses while deployed, but must also have at least one pair of the brown plastic military-issued glasses.

"We make it mandatory for deploying Airmen to bring their military-issued glasses as well as their everyday glasses," the captain said. "If both pairs of glasses became nonoperational, the brown plastic glasses are the only glasses that can be repaired [while deployed]."

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photo illustration by Master Sgt. Lance Cheung and Master Sgt. Scott Wagers

